

The Newspaper Coverage of the Great Chicago Fire

Kiara Young
Brookwood Junior High School, Glenwood
Teacher: Harry Daley

The Chicago fire was a devastating event in Illinois history. According to a web site on the *Chicago Tribune*,

“The coverage of the fire in the media was the most important influence on how it was remembered, since this was by far the major means through which everyone, including Chicagoans, received most of their information about what had happened. Reporters, writers, illustrators, photographers, editors, and publishers decided for the waiting world which aspects of the fire should be discussed, where the emphases should go, and how issues should be framed.”

The *Tribune* was one of the few newspapers to have captured that moment in history and still have many stories to tell. It helped keep Chicagoans together in a time filled with despair and encouraged them to work and to rebuild the city. Chicago had been through a lot but the newspapers did play a big part in rebuilding Chicago after the Fire. The newspaper also helped by telling what things could be learned after the Fire and how to prevent it from happening again.

The Great Chicago Fire occurred on October 8, 1871. Before that the *Chicago Tribune* warned of danger in the city, in the month right before the Great Fire. Troy Taylor wrote in the “Ghosts of the Prairie” web site that the *Chicago Tribune* had remarked on the shabby construction of the buildings downtown . . . “If the city didn’t fall down it was liable to burn.” The *Tribune* staff spotted the danger in the buildings of Chicago and tried to prevent the tragedy that destroyed their city. The *Chicago Tribune* was but one of those who urged the Common Council to expand the level of fire protection in order to avoid a possible disaster. On the very day just before the great fire,

the *Chicago Tribune* printed an alert, which regrettably did not receive much attention.

“Chicago is a city of everlasting pine, shingles, shams, veneers, stucco, and putty,” warned the *Tribune*. Another statement was made by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on October 9, 1872: “In a city where time was everything, and durability was not a matter much considered, street after street was lined with wooden buildings, not with oaken beams and floorings, but an aggregation of flimsy constructed and inflammable pine.”

“On October 8, 1871, four decades after its founding, Chicago’s destiny was rewritten with a pen of a fire,” in the words of Ross Miller. It all started in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn on the west side of town. The fire quickly spread across Chicago, first, traveling through the shanties, sheds, and other buildings that were closely located by Mrs. O’Leary cottage, on Dekoven Street. The fire moved towards the northeast. At 11:30, burning debris made its way across the Chicago River and burned down what was said to be the finest horse stable in the country, completed at the cost of eighty thousand dollars. It was scheduled to be in business on October 11. Some gas tanks exploded as well. This continued spreading the fire. The wind also played a big part in the Great Chicago Fire. Street after street gave way, and family after family was driven out of its home, in an attempt to keep the families alive. The fire department was powerless and could not attempt to prevent the spreading of the fire.

The event is remembered in poetry. “One dark night, when people were in bed, Old Mrs. ‘Leary lit a lantern in her shed. The cow kicked it over, and winked his eye, and said ‘There’ll be a hot time in the old town tonight.’ The Great Chicago Fire originated in the O’Leary barn. This happened when the kerosene lamp Mrs. O’Leary lit was knocked

over by her cow while she was milking it. The lamp quickly ignited and the barn was soon gone.

An excerpt from the *Chicago Tribune* headline on October 11, 1871 stated: “Fire! Destruction of Chicago! 2,600 acres of buildings destroyed, eight thousand people burned out, all of the hotels, banks, public buildings, and Great Business blocks swept away, over a hundred dead bodies recovered from the debris, ten thousands of citizens without home, food, fuel or clothing.” The *Tribune* staff worked throughout the fire to have a full report in the morning paper, but there was not enough water to run the presses, and then the fireproof building burned. Within two days, one of the few remaining printing presses in Chicago was purchased. When the *Tribune* finally appeared it gave information on the fire and free advertisements for people searching for family members and possessions. The *Tribune* continued its efforts, bringing the citizens together to rebuild the city and help those ravaged by their losses. Through everything the *Chicago Tribune* influenced practical attitudes all over the city.

In the end, the newspapers played a significant role in the Great Chicago Fire. From before the Fire to rebuilding Chicago, newspapers like the *Tribune* really did a lot for Chicago and its people. Chicago rose again, and the *Chicago Tribune* did as well. The *Tribune* had informed Chicagoans of the threat in their city. During the fire the *Tribune* staff worked through the fire in an effort to bring the information to the people. Yet they did not succeed, and lost their building, but the *Tribune* was the first newspaper in Chicago to regain its strength and inform the citizens about details of the Fire and the whereabouts of family members.

The newspapers like the *Tribune* all contributed during this event in Illinois history. In the words of a website on the newspaper coverage, “the newspaper helped an audience seeking to comprehend this incomprehensible event, and through it the elusive and contradictory nature of the urban culture they were all creating together.” [From Richard F. Bales, *The Great Chicago Fire and the Myth of Mrs. O’Leary’s Cow*; The Great Chicago Fire, “Great Chicago Fire of 1871,”

<http://chicago.about.com/cs/history/a/01_history_fire.htm> (Dec. 2, 2004); Herman Kogan and Robert Cromie, *The Great Fire Chicago 1871.*; Ross Miller, *The Great Chicago Fire*; The newspaper coverage of the Great Chicago Fire, “The Chicago Tribune’s Coverage of the Great Conflagration,”

<<http://www.lib.nie.edu/ipo/ihy011213.html>> (Dec. 2, 2004); The newspaper coverage of the Great Chicago Fire, “Media Event,” <<http://www.chicagohs.org/fire/media>> (Dec. 2, 2004).]